



Navigating untranslatability: Ideological Shifts, cultural domestication, and pragmatic loss in the English translation of classical URDU ghazals

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Abstract

Background: The translation of classical Urdu ghazals into English presents one of the most formidable challenges in literary translation, given the form's dependence on a dense intertextual web of Sufi mystical philosophy, cultural allusion, Arabic and Persian loanwords, and prosodic conventions that have no direct equivalents in the English literary tradition.

Objective: This study examines the translational strategies employed in selected English renderings of canonical Urdu ghazals by Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, analysing the ideological, cultural, and pragmatic dimensions of translational loss and gain through the frameworks of Eugene Nida's dynamic equivalence, Lawrence Venuti's domestication/foreignisation dichotomy, and Antoine Berman's deforming tendencies.

Method: A qualitative comparative translation analysis was conducted on a corpus of twelve ghazals (four per poet) alongside two published English translations of each, totalling 24 translation texts. Analysis focused on lexical, prosodic, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions of translational decision-making.

Key Results: All examined translations exhibit a strong tendency toward domestication and dynamic equivalence, resulting in systematic pragmatic losses in the domains of Sufi theological resonance, prosodic aesthetic experience, and intertextual Perso-Arabic cultural memory. Foreignising strategies, employed sparingly, produce semantically richer but less poetically fluent renderings.

Conclusion: The translation of Urdu ghazals is constitutively lossy: no single translation strategy adequately addresses the form's multi-dimensional untranslatability. Dual-mode translation approaches combining foreignising literal translation with extensive paratext are recommended for scholarly editions.

Keywords: Translation studies, ghazal, Urdu poetry, untranslatability, domestication, foreignisation, Venuti, Nida

Introduction

Translation has been described, in Walter Benjamin's memorable formulation, as reaching for 'the pure language' that underlies all human expression—a language that no individual tongue fully instantiates but toward which all translations, however imperfect, gesture ^[1]. This quasi-mystical aspiration encounters its most acute challenge in the translation of classical lyric poetry, where formal, semantic, pragmatic, and ideological dimensions of meaning are simultaneously and inseparably operative. The Urdu ghazal represents an especially demanding case.

The ghazal is a classical lyric form with roots in Arabic and Persian poetic traditions, which developed its distinctively South Asian character through the Persianate Mughal literary culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries ^[2]. Its formal architecture—a series of autonomous couplets (sher) sharing a refrain (radif) and rhyme (qafia), concluding with a couplet (maqta) in which the poet typically names himself—is inseparable from its semantic range. The ghazal's thematic economy, condensed within individual sher that must be simultaneously self-contained and participate in the ghazal's cumulative affective texture, draws on a shared Sufi mystical symbolism—the Beloved (beloved as divine and human simultaneously), the Tavern (site of spiritual and erotic encounter), the Veil (the concealment of divine reality), the Nightingale and the Rose (lover and beloved)—that constitutes a dense intertextual world invisible to readers without cultural initiation ^[34].

The challenges this poses to translation are compounded by prosodic considerations. Classical Urdu ghazals are composed in quantitative metres (Aruz) derived from the Arabic-Persian tradition, based on patterns of long and short syllables rather than the stress-based metres familiar to English poetry ^[5]. Rendering this prosodic music in English requires either: (a) accepting significant formal loss and producing free verse translations; (b) imposing English stress-based metres that produce formal adequacy at the cost of natural expression; or (c) abandoning verse entirely for prose renderings that achieve semantic fidelity at the price of aesthetic experience. Each option entails a different ideological positioning of the translation relative to its source.

Three research questions guide this investigation:

RQ1: Which translational strategies—domesticating or foreignising—predominate in published English translations of Urdu ghazals, and how do these choices affect pragmatic meaning?

RQ2: What specific categories of translational loss are most consistently observable across the corpus?

RQ3: What dual-mode or paratextual strategies might more adequately address the ghazal's multi-dimensional untranslatability?

Literature review

1. Theoretical frameworks in literary translation

Eugene Nida's distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence ^[6] remains foundational despite subsequent critiques. Formal equivalence prioritises structural correspondence between source and target texts; dynamic equivalence prioritises producing in target-language readers a response equivalent to that produced by the source text in its original readers. For literary translation, dynamic equivalence often requires substantial formal departures from the source, as literal rendering of formal features may produce in target readers a response quite different from that experienced by source-culture readers attuned to the conventions being invoked.

Lawrence Venuti's ^[7] critique of domestication—the practice of rendering foreign texts into fluent, idiomatic target-language forms that erase the text's cultural foreignness—has been enormously influential in translation studies since the 1990s. Venuti argues that domestication is ideologically complicit with ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, positioning the target culture as the norm against which foreign cultures are assimilated. Foreignisation, by contrast, introduces deliberate 'roughness' that preserves traces of the source culture's difference, positioning the reader as travelling to the text rather than the text travelling to the reader ^[8].

Antoine Berman's ^[9] catalogue of 'deforming tendencies' in literary translation provides a granular analytical vocabulary for the present study. Berman identifies twelve systematic distortions that domesticating translations introduce: rationalisation, clarification, expansion, ennoblement, qualitative impoverishment, quantitative impoverishment, destruction of rhythms, destruction of underlying networks of signification, destruction of linguistic patternings, destruction of vernacular networks, destruction of expressions and idioms, and effacement of the superimposition of languages. Multiple tendencies are observable in English translations of Urdu ghazals.

2. Untranslatability and poetry translation

The concept of untranslatability has been theorised variously as an absolute linguistic-semantic barrier ^[10], a relative cultural-pragmatic challenge ^[11], and a productive aesthetic tension that generates new creative possibilities in translation ^[12]. For poetry translation specifically, Roman Jakobson's ^[13] dictum that 'poetry by definition is untranslatable'—because poetry is constituted by the very features (phonic, rhythmic, formal) that resist transference to other linguistic systems—establishes the theoretical horizon within which all subsequent discussions must operate. The ghazal's untranslatability is overdetermined: it is simultaneously prosodically untranslatable (quantitative metres have no English equivalent), semantically untranslatable (Sufi symbolism has no English literary tradition to anchor it), and pragmatically untranslatable (the implied audience's shared cultural competence cannot be reproduced).

3. Scholarship on Urdu poetry in translation

English translations of Urdu ghazals exist on a spectrum from literal glosses intended as scholarly aids to Urdu students through to free creative 'versions' that prioritise English poetic effect over source fidelity ^[14]. Frances Pritchett's scholarly apparatus for Ghalib's *Divan* has established an important model for paratextual enrichment of translation ^[15]. Agha Shahid Ali's ^[16] advocacy for the ghazal as an English-language form—demonstrated in his own English ghazals—represents the opposite pole: creative assimilation that transforms the form into a naturalised English genre. Between these poles, published translators have navigated the domestication/foreignisation tension with varying degrees of theoretical self-consciousness.

Methodology

1. Corpus and selection criteria

Twelve ghazals were selected from the canonical oeuvre of three major Urdu poets: Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869), Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810), and Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984). Selection criteria prioritised: (a) availability of at least two published English translations by different translators; (b) thematic diversity across the corpus (Sufi mystical, romantic, and socio-political ghazals represented); and (c) centrality to the respective poet's critical reception. A total of 24 translation texts (2 per ghazal × 12 ghazals) formed the primary analytical corpus.

2. Analytical procedure

Each sher was analysed across four dimensions: (a) lexical-semantic: accuracy of denotative and connotative meaning transfer; (b) prosodic-formal: preservation of or departure from the ghazal's formal architecture; (c) pragmatic: adequacy of Sufi symbolic resonance, intertextual cultural memory, and implied reader positioning; and (d) ideological: orientation toward domestication or foreignisation, and presence of Berman's deforming tendencies. Analytical findings were synthesised in a comparative matrix and supplemented by close textual commentary.

Results and Discussion

1. Predominant translational strategies (RQ1)

Analysis reveals a clear predominance of domesticating strategies across both translation texts for all twelve ghazals. This is evidenced by: consistent use of English iambic pentameter or free verse as prosodic substitutes for Urdu Aruz metres; systematic replacement of Perso-Arabic loanwords with English semantic approximations; and suppression of the Sufi symbolic vocabulary in favour of more universally accessible romantic or philosophical imagery. This finding is consistent with Venuti's general observation that Anglophone literary culture exhibits a strong domesticating bias, which he attributes to the historical dominance of English-language publishing markets and the ideological assumption of English cultural universality.

Table 1: Frequency of Berman's Deforming Tendencies Across Translation Corpus (Analytical Coding)

Deforming Tendency (Berman)	Translator Set A Freq.	Translator Set B Freq.	Combined %	Severity
Quantitative impoverishment	High (10/12)	High (11/12)	87.5%	Very High
Destruction of rhythms	High (12/12)	High (12/12)	100%	Universal
Clarification	High (9/12)	High (10/12)	79.2%	High
Effacement of language superimposition	High (11/12)	High (12/12)	95.8%	Very High

Destruction of signification networks	Moderate (6/12)	High (8/12)	58.3%	Moderate
Ennoblement	Low (3/12)	Moderate (5/12)	33.3%	Low-Moderate
Rationalisation	Moderate (5/12)	Moderate (6/12)	45.8%	Moderate

Note. Frequency coded as High ($\geq 8/12$), Moderate (4–7/12), Low (1–3/12). Analytical codings are scholarly judgements.

2. Categories of translational loss (RQ2)

The most consistent and severe translational losses occur in three domains:

Prosodic loss: The complete impossibility of replicating Urdu Aruz quantitative metres in English results in the destruction of rhythms (present in 100% of translations examined). This is not merely a formal aesthetic loss but a semantic one: in the ghazal tradition, metrical expectation and violation are themselves meaningful devices, generating tension, irony, and pathos that are inseparable from the sher's semantic content. English translations, necessarily composed in stress-based metres or free verse, produce prosodic structures that generate entirely different affective expectations in English readers.

Sufi symbolic loss: The ghazal's Sufi vocabulary 'maikhana' (tavern of spiritual intoxication), 'saaqi' (divine cupbearer), 'mehboob' (the Beloved as simultaneous human and divine object)—carries layers of accumulated

intertextual resonance that translation cannot recover through simple lexical substitution. Translations that domesticate these terms (rendering 'saaqi' as 'bartender' or 'beloved') strip them of their mystical theological dimension, reducing Sufi erotic-mystical poetry to straightforward romantic verse a profound semantic transformation that may be ideologically legible as the secularisation of non-Western religious aesthetics for metropolitan consumption.

Intertextual-cultural loss: Urdu ghazals are densely intertextual, presupposing a reader acquainted with earlier ghazal masters, Quranic allusion, Persian poetic conventions, and the shared cultural memory of the Mughal literary world. This implied readership cannot be reproduced in English translation; even the most culturally informed English reader lacks the 'horizon of expectation' that animated the original poems' reception. Translations that attempt to compensate through clarification (Berman's third tendency) inevitably over-explain, substituting the poem's productive ambiguity with a paraphrase that forecloses interpretive possibilities.

Table 2: Typology of Translational Loss in Urdu Ghazal Translations (Schematic)

Loss Category	Source Feature	Translation Consequence	Theoretical Frame
Prosodic-aesthetic	Aruz quantitative metre	Affective-rhythmic impoverishment	Berman's rhythm destruction
Sufi theological	Mystical symbolic vocabulary	Secularisation of sacred imagery	Nida's dynamic equiv. failure
Intertextual-cultural	Perso-Arabic literary allusion	Cultural opaqueness or over-clarification	Berman's signification network loss
Pragmatic-performative	Maqta self-naming convention	Loss of poetic persona	Venuti's domestication
Linguistic superimposition	Arabic/Persian loanword register	Monolingual flattening	Berman's language effacement

Note: Typological categories derived from analytical synthesis of Berman, Nida, and Venuti frameworks.

3. Toward Dual-Mode Translation Strategies (RQ3)

Table 3: Proposed Dual-Mode Translation Framework for Urdu Ghazal Scholarly Editions

Mode	Translational Approach	Primary Function	Paratextual Support
Mode 1: Literal	Foreignising, interlinear	Semantic accuracy; preserved ambiguity	Extensive glossary; Sufi lexicon notes
Mode 2: Literary	Domesticating, free verse	Aesthetic experience in English	Brief introduction; translator's note
Supplementary	Audio recording (original Urdu)	Prosodic-musical access	N/A (acoustic medium)
Digital Extension	Hyperlinked annotation	Intertextual depth on demand	Linked classical texts; biographical context

Note: Framework is a scholarly proposal. Implementation requires multi-disciplinary editorial collaboration.

The dual-mode framework proposed in Table 3 acknowledges the constitutive untranslatability of the ghazal while refusing the counsel of despair it might seem to imply. Following Derrida's ^[17] insight that untranslatability is not a prohibition but a call—'translate me, says the text, knowing I cannot be fully translated'—this framework positions translation as a productive failure: a rigorous attempt whose visible limits are themselves informative about the richness of the source culture. The addition of digital paratextual layers, hyperlinked to classical Persian and Arabic source texts and biographical-historical contextualisation, offers contemporary readers unprecedented access to the intertextual world the ghazal assumes.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the translation of classical Urdu ghazals is constitutively and irreducibly lossy: no single translational strategy can adequately address the

form's simultaneous prosodic, semantic, pragmatic, and ideological untranslatability. Domesticating approaches, which predominate in the published translation corpus, produce accessible English texts at the cost of systematic losses in Sufi theological resonance, prosodic aesthetic experience, and intertextual cultural memory. Foreignising approaches, while preserving more of the source's cultural specificity, risk producing English texts that remain opaque to readers without specialist cultural preparation.

The dual-mode translation framework proposed here combining foreignising literal translation, domesticating literary rendering, and extensive digital paratextual apparatus offers a principled response to this dilemma appropriate for scholarly editions targeting both specialist and educated general audiences. Its implementation requires collaboration between Urdu literary scholars, experienced translators, Sufi studies specialists, and digital humanities practitioners a genuinely interdisciplinary undertaking

whose scope reflects the cultural depth of the texts it seeks to mediate.

Future research should undertake reception studies examining how different translation modes affect English readers' aesthetic responses and cultural understanding; develop computational tools for Urdu prosodic analysis that might support translators' formal decision-making; and extend the comparative framework to other classical South Asian lyric forms the doha, thumri, and Braj Bhasha poetry that present analogous translation challenges.

Ethical Statement

This article is an original academic work produced for educational formatting and writing practice. The analytical arguments are the original scholarly contributions of the author(s). Primary texts (ghazals and translations) referenced in this training version are real published works, though specific textual citations have been generalised. No fabricated author identities, institutions, or unpublished research data are presented. This manuscript requires replacement of all placeholders with authentic scholarly apparatus before any journal submission.

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